

## **POLE CREEK WILDERNESS STUDY AREA**

### **1. THE STUDY AREA - 12,969 acres**

The Pole Creek WSA (NV-020-014A) is located in central Washoe County, about 20 miles southwest of Gerlach, Nevada. It is a 3 hour drive from Reno. The WSA includes 12,969 acres of public land and no private or state lands. The area is bordered on the south by the Pyramid Lake Indian Reservation, to the west and northwest by a road and the Western Pacific Railroad and on the north and east by private land. The WSA is roughly triangular in shape with 5 or 6 miles on a side.

The study area lies along part of the west face of the Fox Range, a typical mountain range of the Basin and Range Geomorphic Province. The Smoke Creek Desert lies to the west. There are two distinct landforms within the study area: part of the Fox Range and the fringing desert piedmont. The Fox Range is a highly dissected, rugged landform of steep canyons and prominent ridges. Along the east edge and adjacent to the main ridge line, the terrain is markedly smoother and less dissected. There are several prominent canyons in this section, running both north-south and east-west.

The fringing desert piedmont is the transition zone between the Smoke Creek Desert to the west and the Fox Mountain Range. It is an alluvial landscape with gentle slopes and shallow parallel washes and small wave-cut terraced hills to the south. The elevation of the WSA ranges from 3,870 feet near the railroad to 7,608 at the summit of Pah Rum Peak

### **2. RECOMMENDATION AND RATIONALE**

The recommendation for this WSA is to release all 12,969 acres for uses other than wilderness.

The Pole Creek WSA is recommended for uses other than wilderness because the high and moderate mineral potentials identified justify management emphasis on continued access for mineral exploration and development rather than management as a wilderness area. Three thousand and four hundred acres (26% of WSA) are rated as having high potential for metallic minerals and 9,569 acres (the remainder of the WSA) are rated as having moderate mineral potential. The minerals involved are lead, copper, zinc, gold, silver, tungsten, mercury, molybdenum and nickel. Also, 3,700 acres have moderate geothermal potential. There are 100 acres of pre-FLPMA mining claims in the WSA.

Based on current and past activities in the area, short-term interest in the Pole Creek WSA is likely. This interest would result in precious metal exploration consisting of cross-country travel, small drill sites and 1/2 mile of access roads disturbing a total of five acres. There are no existing geothermal leases, however, the exploration activities would continue with or without additional leasing activities. Oil and gas potential has been identified as being low, so no exploration is projected for them.

### **3. WILDERNESS CHARACTERISTICS**

**A. Naturalness:** The WSA is predominantly natural. There are two distinct landforms within the study area: part of the Fox Range and the fringing desert piedmont. The Fox Range is a highly dissected, rugged landform of steep canyons and prominent ridges. Along the east edge and adjacent to the main ridge line, the terrain is markedly smoother and less dissected. There are several prominent canyons in this section, running both north-south and east-west. The fringing desert piedmont is the transition zone between the Smoke Creek Desert to the west and the Fox Mountain Range. It is an alluvial landscape with gentle slopes and shallow parallel washes and small wave-cut terraced hills to the south.

Range improvements in the two grazing allotments consist of two developed springs, seven miles of fence and two vehicle ways totalling 2.4 miles. The Western Pacific Railroad runs along the western boundary

and is visible and audible from adjacent areas in the WSA. The main mining area in Wild Horse Canyon is visible from small portions inside the unit.

**B. Solitude:** In the Fox Range section of the WSA, low shrubs and scattered juniper offer fair to poor vegetative screening while highly dissected drainages offer excellent topographic screening. Low shrubs provide minimal vegetative screening in the fringing desert piedmont section. Also, topographic screening is generally poor except on the wave-cut terraced hills on the south end where it is fair.

With the exception of the area within Wild Horse Canyon which has mining activity in it, the WSA is of a size and shape that would provide solitude. The low military flights and the railroad are also major external impacts on solitude. Periodic, light traffic along the boundary roads is visible from immediately adjacent areas within the unit but does not create a significant impact.

**C. Primitive and Unconfined Recreation:** The WSA has outstanding opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation. There is easy accessibility both to the unit and within it. There is a variety of wildlife and excellent views of the Smoke Creek Desert to the west. Day-hiking, backpacking, camping, hunting, rock-climbing and nature study are activities that are known to occur. There are no known fish populations but potential for a fishery exists in Wild Horse Canyon. The WSA is in the Fox and Lake Ranges Wild Horse Use Area so people interested in viewing wild horses and burros may have the opportunity.

**D. Special Features:** There are no special features in the WSA.

**4. Manageability** (the area must be capable of being effectively managed to preserve its wilderness character):

The WSA is capable of being managed as wilderness. There will be manageability problems, however, associated with access to and development of the 100 acres of pre-FLPMA mining claims. Access to allow the development and operation of the mining claims would have to be granted which would result in new roads into the area. There would be management concerns associated with the following: vehicle ways (2.4 miles), easy accessibility for ORVs (3,000 acres or 23% of WSA) and occasional military flights.

## **5. ENERGY AND MINERAL RESOURCE VALUES**

The following conclusions were determined: 3,400 acres rated high for metallic mineral potential (lead, copper, nickel, gold, zinc, mercury, silver and molybdenum), 9,569 acres rated moderate for metallic mineral potential (lead, tungsten, mercury, and molybdenum) and 3,700 acres rated as having moderate geothermal potential.

There is no present production of any mineral or geothermal resources in the study area. The Wild Horse Mine, located just outside the northern boundary of the WSA, has been a past producer of gold and silver. The WSA was nominated an "Area of Critical Mineral Concern" by Exxon Minerals Company. Based on surrounding current and past metallic mineral exploration/development, short-term interest within the Pole Creek WSA is likely. This interest would result in precious metal exploration, consisting of cross-country travel, one mile of drill roads and pads, dozer trenches and open cuts disturbing five acres on the southwest side.

Geothermal interest has subsided compared to the past, however, proposed developments are increasing in the surrounding areas. This interest would result in exploration consisting of cross country travel, small drill sites and 1/2 mile of access roads disturbing 5 acres along the west side. There are no existing geothermal leases, however, these exploration activities would occur with or without additional leasing activities. No exploration or development is expected for low potential oil and gas.

In summary, quantities of various mineral and energy resources are unknown but the potential for occurrence is from moderate to high throughout the entire WSA. The total acres of projected disturbance resulting from energy/mineral activity would be approximately 10 acres.

#### **6. SUMMARY OF WSA-SPECIFIC COMMENTS**

During the initial and intensive inventory stages (1978-1980) many of the 16 comments discussed characteristics of the area (e.g., intrusions, resources, wilderness qualities) or suggested boundary changes. Reasons given for supporting wilderness study status were the following: naturalness and opportunities for solitude and recreation. Reasons given for opposing wilderness study area status were the following: other resource values, roads and intrusions. These comments addressed the entire 100,000 acres which became the Fox Range (014) and Pole Creek (014A) WSAs. About 12,000 acres of the original study area have since been released from wilderness consideration.

During the 90-day comment period for the draft Wilderness Environmental Impact Statement, three formal public meetings were held in Nevada (Gerlach on November 1, Winnemucca on November 3 and Reno on November 8, 1983). Of the 9 written comments received during this period, three of them supported more wilderness than the draft EIS (no wilderness) and six of them agreed with the draft EIS. Several comments discussed the need to preserve the naturalness, wildlife, scenery and recreation opportunities for future generations.

No comments about wilderness were received from Washoe County agencies or officials. The Governor of the State of Nevada concurred with the Bureau's recommendation. The U.S. Air Force supports wilderness designation provided no restrictions are placed on military flights. It has said that it will work with the BLM if military flights create problems in some areas.

No comments were received on the final EIS.